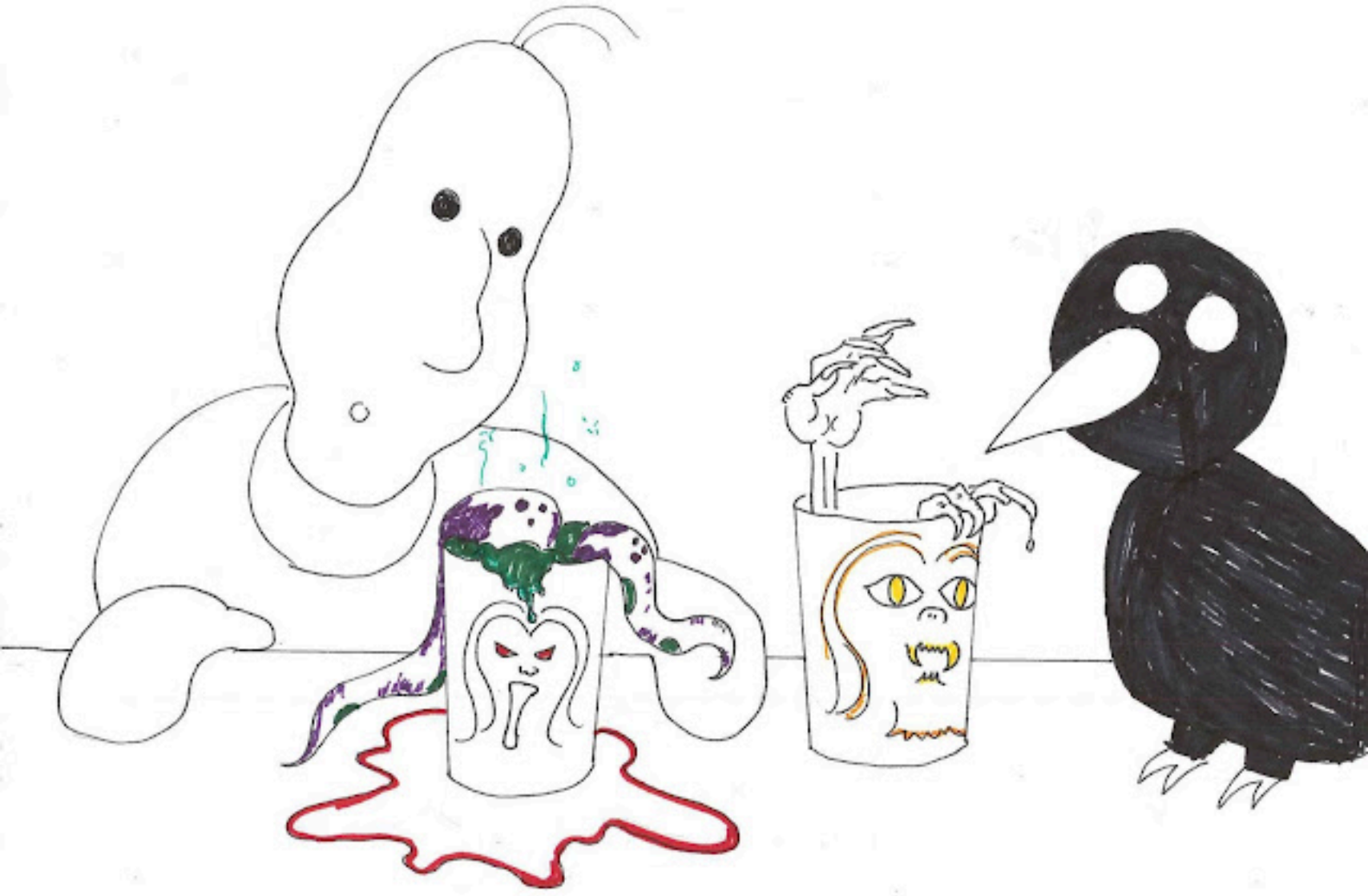
Halloween Brew



Virgil Templeton had been in enough "professional" conferences to know when one had turned hostile: abrupt, accusatory statements followed by terse responses; arms folded across expanding chests; hooded, contemptuous glares. All clear indications that nothing would get accomplished and the so-called meeting would be one big waste of everybody's time.

But why? Why was the upper management of Bruch's Candy treating a curious but well-meaning contingent of NASA scientists with such open hostility?

"This is quite ridiculous," Mr. Muncie, Bruch's president and CEO sneered. "Clearly your data is flawed, or your conclusions are ill-formed." He stood to leave the room. "And I've wasted enough time. Good day, gentleman."

Virgil and his team exchanged looks. To his right, Walter Epstein, the project's lead cartographer, shrugged and started to rise.

"Hold on," one of Bruch's team - a sharply put-together woman from marketing whose name was, appropriately, Candice - patted the air in a gesture for them to remain seated. "Just... hold on one second."

She met Mr. Muncie at the door, and they stepped out together. Through the window wall, Virgil watched them discuss the situation: the CEO was all but emotionless and barely moving while Candice's hands did as much talking as her mouth. After a while, it appeared Candice hit upon the winning argument and, with a slight nod of his head, Mr. Muncie conceded. They returned to the conference room.

"Gentlemen," Mr. Muncie addressed the room. "Please excuse my outburst. This is, of course, the busy season for us and I sometimes forget myself. Naturally, we will be pleased to give you a tour of our factory, but I assure you, you'll find nothing out of the ordinary. No mysterious rituals or fantastic conspiracy; just the same formula we've used for the past hundred plus years.

"Nevertheless," Bruch's CEO straightened and smoothed his tie. "If you came all the way here to see how we make candy corn...." He flashed a wide, incongruous smile. "We certainly don't want to disappoint."

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Two weeks ago

Four in the morning, standing around a poster-sized computer screen, Virgil pinched the bridge of his nose and muttered, "Run it again."

"But...?" Gregg Carpenter started to complain.

"Run it. Run it." Virgil put a hand on his shoulder. "And call information security again-"

"-They won't-"

"-and tell them...," Virgil put steel in his voice, tired of interruptions and problems, but Gregg spun around in his chair.

"They won't take my calls." Gregg matched steel with steel. "They say I'm crazy. They say I'm playing a joke. They said if I called again, they'd report me to the chief project manager - and that's you, right?"

"Yeah."

"So?"

Virgil continued gazing at the screen until his vision blurred. It was impossible. Impossible!

"Okay. I'll call them in the morning," he relented. "In fact, you go home. Just.... go home."

"Nope." Gregg returned to the computer and started firing away at the keyboard. "Boss said run it again; I'mma run it again."

The screen blanked out, flickered, then numbers and graphs started repopulating the pixels. Virgil squeezed Gregg's shoulders and backed away.

Walter saw him passing down the hall and jumped up.

"Need to talk," Walter said, joining him and they walked together in perfect step.

"We're still checking it," Virgil said.

"Maybe information security will find something, but not the equations. If it's a hack, it's...."

"What?"

"Well, it's impossible. I mean, at this point, it would have to have been hacked at the source. On Mars."

"What are you saying?"

"The planet itself," Walter took off his glasses for dramatic effect. "Look, I know you've been busting my hump to document my sonar mapping app., but I haven't. Anywhere. It's still mostly-" Walter tapped his temple.

"And?"

"And so, nobody could manipulate the results. The data, maybe, but only I can model the images. And if somebody did tweak the data, it would just come out garbage. This isn't a security breach."

"Look, Walter. I'm tired. And I'm fuzzy. Can you keep it simple and put it in a nutsack?"

"I've finished modeling the core of planet Mars, and it agrees with the unlikely findings of the chemical analysis team."

Walter retrieved a piece of paper from his lab-coat, unfolded it and passed it to Virgil.

Virgil studied the schematic: a wire-formed planet-sphere containing a brightly

colored triangle - white tip, orange middle, yellow base.

"What the hell?"

"Sonar doesn't lie," Walter said. "The planet Mars is made of candy corn."

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Now

"Believe me, I understand if our request seems frivolous," Virgil explained to Mr. Muncie as they navigated Bruch's cubicle farm on their way to the factory floor. Heads of wide-eyed employees popped up frequently and stared unblinking as the group passed. It made Virgil uncomfortable, and he talked nervously, prattling on if for no other reason than to fill the eerie, silent air. "We didn't mean to imply any... thing, really. To be honest, we're not sure why we're even here - but we've run out of avenues of investigation, so.... I guess we're just hoping to be inspired, maybe. Maybe find a kernel of truth in a newborn kernel of candy corn."

Mr. Muncie wrinkled his nose and sniffed. He faced Virgil and said, "Truth?"

"Well," Virgil took an involuntary step back from Mr. Muncie's intense gaze. "That's not meant to be an accusation. Honestly, we're grasping at straws here. If I'd known it would be such an inconvenience...."

"Not at all," Mr. Muncie turned abruptly and put his hand on a door. "Truth. Yes. *Those who seek truth shall find it*, isn't that in your Bible?"

Virgil exchanged looks with Walter and the other two scientists, Gregg and Williams, he'd brought along for the meeting. They all shrugged.

"I'm pretty sure it's not," Walter replied eventually. "But I guess it should be?"

Satisfied, Mr. Muncie pushed open the door and ushered them through, saying; "Gentlemen.... The Truth."

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At first glance, it appeared to be an enormous, empty warehouse. Concrete floor, bare whitewashed walls. High-set, paneled windows. Then it changed. The whitewash expanded. The windows disappeared. The floor and ceiling met in a seamless bubble of white. With no color or lines to mark depth, the room stretched to infinity; or it was close enough to touch the farthest side just by raising your hand.

Virgil looked down and couldn't determine if his feet were on solid ground below, or floating in ether. He felt suddenly and irrepressibly nauseous.

"Maintain," a strong voice said. He turned towards the sound and saw Mr. Muncie - or what he assumed to be Mr. Muncie - glaring at him with piercing eyes. Eyes that were fading solid white, in an equally blanched face. The head, also, started to change. The top becoming pointed; the apex of a triangle. And Muncie's torso, now a burnt orange color, another clearly defined geometric section. Finally, his hips and legs, sunshine yellow, widened into a ridiculously fat base.

The transformation completed, Mr. Muncie was now a giant piece of candy corn. Beside him, the lady from marketing had also changed. She, too, took on the appearance of a pyramid with only the slightest nubs of breasts in her orange torso to define gender.

Virgil felt himself spinning away; unable to trust his vision or other senses in this crazy room.

"Truth!" Mr. Muncie shouted. "Seekers of truth! Humans! Bah!"

Suddenly purple tendrils of plasma cracked into existence and spread across the white void like lightning. They converged in a swirling mass of energy. The mass grew into a ball, expanded, then burst apart in an explosion of candy corn. So much candy corn! It filled the space like air and Virgil feared he would chock on it if he dared breath.

Then rents opened in the walls and the candy was sucked away with the whooshing sound of a vacuum.

"Truth," Mr. Muncie said. "One of your scientists came close, yes, a Mr. Sagan, when he said you're made of star stuff. Stuff."

Virgil felt the creature moving. He watched as it floated behind Williams who stood motionless, eyes closed, trying not to collapse. The white part of the monster's head flared, and purple lightning returned. This time, the tendrils sought out a destination - they converged at the center of William's stomach. The scientist barely had time to scream before bursting into a violent fireworks display of candy corn - the kernels of which peppered Virgil's face like buckshot.

Vents opened, vacuums whooshed, and Williams was gone.

"Another one of your kind," the thing that was Bruch's CEO continued, "a comedian, so-called, also stumbled around the truth when he joked that *all the candy corn ever made was made in 1911*. A correct philosophy; woefully wrong chronology."

The creature stood beside Walter now, whose eyes betrayed raw panic. As the air crackled, signifying the emergence of more purple lightning, Walter screamed, "Wait! No! You can't do this!"

The thing's coloring dulled, and it smiled. "Are you afraid? You shouldn't be. You Scientist. You should recognize this for what it is: evolution. The conservation of mass and energy."

"No, please...."

"Take heart, Scientist. This may not be the end of your consciousness. Ask yourself: do you like candy corn?"

"Well... as a kid, I...."

Impassioned by this turn of conversation, Gregg spoke up, "It isn't a question of preference - whether you like candy corn or not - it is provable to be the most flavorless, vacant confection. The ingredients are cheap and offensive to any discernable palate. It doesn't qualify as food and is barely digestible. Why, even its

shape and coloring are obscene-"

The Mr. Muncie thing glowed. Purple lighting crackled into existence. In a flash, Gregg exploded in a rattling cacophony of colorful candy corn.

"Well now," the thing chortled. "He obviously didn't like it. But what of you?" It turned its attention back to Walter. "You were saying, *as a kid...?"*

"I liked it," Walter confessed. "A lot. I would eat it until I got sick. Then I'd eat more. Even now...." He looked at Virgil; a guilty, hangdog expression. "I eat it sometimes. Too much, sometimes...."

"Ah," the Mr. Muncie thing said. "Then you'll enjoy this."

The thing glowed. Air crackled. Purple lighting engulfed Walter - but instead of exploding, the scientist's form shimmered and contorted. His human shape melted away; narrowed at top, expanded at bottom. Shortly, he took on the shape and volume of a narrow pyramid.

White head, orange torso, yellow bottom. Walter had become a living, sentient being of pure candy corn.

"Welcome to your highest life-form, Scientists," the Mr. Muncie thing expressed joyfully.

Virgil looked on with terror as the colorless face of the Walter-thing beamed ecstatically. His friend and coworker were no longer human.

And, even more fearful, Virgil knew that Walter now tasted horrible.

Happy Halloween!